

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

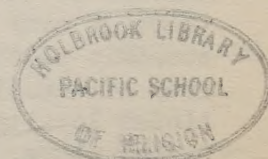
Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, Room 1111, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Number 65

October 1941

The Social and Religious Significance of the Rural Neighborhood

By Irwin T. Sanders* and T. W. Spicer**



"Without Neighbors, Nothing Is Possible"

When the Bulgarian peasant says, "Without neighbors, nothing is possible," or "God help those who have bad neighbors," he is speaking from a rich social experience and as a representative of the agricultural village, that type of social organization which has persisted for centuries in spite of the gravest political and economic upheavals. Associated with this social stability of the village community is the neighborly sharing of work, implements, leisure and, at times, sustenance. Although rural America is largely a land of separated farmsteads in contrast to the compact European village, it too has found it necessary to rely upon neighborhoods for the discharge of certain important economic, social and religious functions.

What is an American Rural Neighborhood?

If one were to ask the students of a high school class in vocational agriculture to name the neighborhood from which each of them came, there would be a series of answers like the following: Pisgah, White Hill, Dry Valley, Jack's Store or Mt. Tabor. That is, most rural students would feel identified with a locality grouping which has a definite name and is made up of families, most of whom the student can name off one by one. To be sure, many of these neighborhood names do not appear on any map, but the students can draw within reasonable limits the boundaries of their neighborhoods on a county map once they have plotted the families to be included. The same would be true of their elders. Further study shows that members of these families either know or else know much about each other, that the area included in a neighborhood is usually small enough to make such intimate contacts and knowledge possible, and that the association among these families has become almost traditional. Thus we can describe the rural neighborhood as a set of traditional social relationships among families in an area small enough for face-to-face contact.

The Neighborhood Is Changing

Whatever analysis we make of the social and religious significance of the rural neighborhood must be in the light of our rapidly changing social scene. After the World War rural sociologists, deeply interested as they were in the rural com-

*Dr. Irwin T. Sanders is sociologist in the Department of Sociology, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Kentucky. He spent six years on the faculty of the American College of Sofia, Bulgaria, and returned to the U.S.A. in 1937.

**The Rev. T. W. Spicer is Chairman of the Kentucky Rural Church Council. For many years he has served the rural church and at the present time is a pastor of the Mt. Pleasant Church in Keene, Kentucky.

munity, described the process by which the village center was taking unto itself one by one the functions which formerly resided in the neighborhood. School consolidation was the most spectacular trend, but this was accompanied by the closing of cross-roads stores, blacksmith shops and grist mills. Furthermore, farmers became better acquainted with people in the village and were apparently less dependent upon the next-door neighbors for companionship. On the surface and in light of knowledge at that time such trends seemed to spell the doom for the American rural neighborhood. Actually, many rural neighborhoods did die, with the result that many rural churches shut their doors.

On the other hand, recent surveys by the Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare of the United States Department of Agriculture have indicated the persistence of many neighborhoods in the face of these seemingly adverse conditions. One economic function after another has gone but the neighborhood still remains as an area of association. People feel a loyalty to it. One explanation for this continued loyalty is the dependence people have upon the neighborhood for certain social needs, to be discussed below. As long, therefore, as the neighborhood discharges these social functions, it will remain important. Another explanation for the presence of so many neighborhoods lies in the fact that whereas many neighborhoods have died, others have come into being, say at the intersection of two important new highways. A third factor in the situation is that there are great areas of America where rural people are still comparatively isolated; here the neighborhoods still perform many economic functions.

The fact is that the neighborhood still exists, but it is constantly subject to change. What the future holds in store would involve unprofitable speculation; what is of immediate importance is its social and religious significance.

The Neighborhood's Social Significance

Neighborhoods differ greatly. Some are bound together by the blood-ties existing among the families; in others a school or a church with a wide-awake program acts as a cohesive factor, or else economic considerations may play some part. In the study of eighty neighborhoods of a southern county, the most closely knit neighborhood found was centered around moonshining. No revenue officer could enter the area without his presence being immediately announced from neighbor to neighbor by telephone or gunfire. On the other hand, the families of a nearby neighborhood spent much energy during the summer in staging a tent meeting, and throughout the winter enjoyed talking of the meeting concluded as well as the one to come. Not far away was a third neighborhood of fairly well-to-do farmers who prided themselves upon not allowing any tent meetings to be held in their neighborhood "because they were just a waste of time." Due, therefore, to these differences in neighborhoods, even in the same county, it is hazardous to generalize about them. Some social aspects do seem basic, though.

1. The Neighborhood Is An Area of Intimate Response

According to Professor W. I. Thomas, there are four fundamental wishes which lie at the basis of human conduct: the wish for new experience, the wish for security, the wish for response, and the wish for recognition. Certainly the rural neighborhood, together with the family, helps fulfil the third wish--response "as expressed in love, friendship and congenial association." As daily life becomes more impersonal, individuals find it necessary to have some place to turn for the understanding companionship essential for mental well-being. Professor Charles Cooley taught that there were three primary social groups which prepared the individual for normal participation in society: the home, the play group and the neighborhood. These are face-to-face groups. Not only does a man derive pleasure from being able to say when driving down the road, "I know all the people from here on to the other side of that hill way over yonder," it is even more important that he have opportunity to visit informally with these neighbors.

In the well regulated home the children early in life are brought under the influence of the church. There many sterling life habits are formed which make for real Christian citizenship and equip them for social and religious leadership. Under such environment life attachments are formed which after a while result in new homes, expanding interests and a new sense of responsibility for the neighborhood as a whole.

To be a good neighbor means more than just passing the time of day, or the exchange of recipes, or the products of field or garden; it means entering into the joys and sorrows of those around you and in some measure to rejoice with those that rejoice, to wipe the tears from weeping eyes, to bind up broken hearts, to plant a rose where grew a thorn and lift someone's burden, which has become too heavy to bear, and leave in its place a song. To this task the church in our neighborhood has dedicated itself. While we do not claim for ourselves success in our undertaking, a few illustrations will, I think, reveal that real progress has been made.

A call upon a sick child, who had not had the benefit of medical attention, revealed that he had a ruptured appendix. He was rushed to a hospital where the surgeon held out little hope for his recovery. The family hastened to town to be near the sick child and in their absence the house burned to the ground together with all their earthly possessions. A house was found for them on an adjoining farm and neighbors contributed from their own supply of furniture and clothing to re-establish them in house-keeping. In quick succession the father and one twelve-year girl were stricken with typhoid fever and died within two weeks of the loss of their home. The sick child eventually was able to return to his home and the only money paid on the hospital bill and for relief of the family in their desperate need was that contributed by the church and neighbors.

Another family had an early morning fire and lost everything, escaping only in their night clothes. Again the response was prompt and generous and they were soon set up to house-keeping again. In another instance, where the husband and father was stricken with typhoid just as his tobacco crop was at the housing stage, the neighbors met and housed his crop without a cent of expense to their sick neighbor.

One Sunday morning a tenant farmer sat down to his breakfast after firing the coke-oven all night in the barn where his crop of tobacco was housed. It was perhaps the best crop he had raised in a long time and he looked forward to receiving a good price for his year of labor. Finishing his meal, he started again for the barn to see if everything was all right before getting a little sleep. As he came in sight of the barn, he saw the roof falling in as flames devoured the fruit of his summer of toil. Discouraged and sick enough to die, he sat down under a tree in the yard, trying to think out some way to meet the changed condition. That was the only crop that he had; everything was invested in that crop and as he thought of the months before another crop could be produced and the family looking to him for food and raiment, the future looked dark indeed. At the meeting house there were many expressions of sympathy and the question naturally arose, "How can we help?" One said, "I can spare him a load of my tobacco." Another could spare two loads, and so it went, until when the crop was finally sold and the returns were in, it was found that his income was above the average and at a time when he thought poverty was staring him in the face.

It was considered a privilege to assist a neighbor in wiring his house for electricity when the R.E.A. lines came through, and some of the most painstaking and highly commended wiring was done in this manner. Labor-saving devices were installed in some of the homes in the same way, such as kitchen cabinets, sinks, pitcher-spout pumps, deep-well pumps and even entire bathrooms. Advice is freely sought and given among neighbors upon every conceivable problem, and few fail of a solution.

The church was demolished by a cyclone and the whole community mourned its loss.

2. To Carry On The Historic Mission of The Church

This religious function is variously interpreted by different religious bodies but there would be essential agreement over the following purposes:

(a) To teach. This involves the promoting of a system of beliefs and an accompanying understanding of the obligations of a religious profession.

(b) To further Christian neighborliness. To believe is not enough; there must also be the will to do. Because of this, religion must carry with it a dynamic which makes people want to translate beliefs and convictions into daily living. Not all relations within a neighborhood are grounded in the Christian virtues, the moon-shining neighborhood being a case in point. The sacred task of the church is to Christianize these relationships, first in the immediate neighborhood, then in the world at large. In doing so the church tends to give a character to the neighborhood as revealed in the behavior of its members.

(c) To uphold the dignity of the individual. Christianity deals with the individual, not the mass. The same is true with the primary group such as the family, the play group and the neighborhood where the emphasis is upon the individual relationships. In this sense the rural neighborhood and the church find another common ground, each proving of service to the other.

3. The Neighborhood As A Social Unit for Church Planning

Church areas do not necessarily correspond with the neighborhood areas, but where there is a fair degree of correspondence, those planning the church program would find it effective to work on a neighborhood basis rather than to plan for the whole countryside in a vague, indefinite manner. This need not imply that one's efforts would be exclusively within the neighborhood, but once the neighborhood is mapped and all families plotted, the church workers can quickly discover how many families are represented in church attendance, how many render financial support and other activities deemed important to the life of the church. Percentages can then be worked out, improvement measured and an esprit de corps developed with the church as the focal point. The neighborhood has been made the basis for representation for county land-use planning in agriculture and the chances are that it would prove suitable for religious planning as well. Competing churches might work out a cooperative plan to make the whole neighborhood more church-conscious and more interested in "neighborly relations" in the Christian sense.

One rural minister, serving churches in five different neighborhoods, talked with well-informed residents and then drew up the boundaries for each of the neighborhoods which he served. He later said that nothing had proven so helpful in his work as the contacts he made and the view he gained of the neighborhoods as distinctive social realities. They are there as social units to be utilized; the problem is to recognize their importance and then discover them.

Irwin T. Sanders

A Neighborhood in Action

For many years the term "Neighborhood" had a very indefinite meaning to me, but in the last few years, when my lot has been cast in a rural community, its meaning has undergone a remarkable change. I now look upon the neighborhood as a large family whose interests are so interwoven that what affects one leaves, in some measure, its influence upon every other home. Also the social and religious life is so closely related that what affects one affects the other. Any marked change in the religious atmosphere is bound to have its reaction upon the social activities, and social life, in most cases, revolves around the church.

But the point is self-evident; human beings do need intimate, face-to-face contacts. Among rural people the neighborhood is a traditional area in which this need is met.

2. The Neighborhood Is A Unit of Spontaneous Mutual Aid

Times of crisis, involving one or many families, arise in every locality. A house burns down, a crop is ruined by a storm, or someone becomes seriously ill. Since individual families cannot always cope with such situations alone, they of necessity rely upon others. In rural areas mutual aid is spontaneous, voluntary and personal. Even though there is no elaborate organization of relief, the unfortunate neighbors are aided without any expectation of reward; the only price asked is that the family which is helped prove a good neighbor when someone else stands in need. The neighborhood, therefore, gives a feeling of security--one of the wishes mentioned by Thomas. Families that have been accepted by the neighborhood and are a part of it need not feel alone since they know they can count upon neighbors whenever it becomes necessary.

3. The Neighborhood Is An Agency for Social Control

As intimated above, the neighborhood demands a price for the intimate response and the security that it affords. Its families expect each other to measure up to the values that they commonly esteem. Failure to conform brings the tongue-lashings of gossip and perhaps a certain amount of ostracism upon the non-conformist. By punishing the extremists, the neighborhood therefore sets a pattern into which it guides its young people in their formative years. The neighborhood, aiding the family, inculcates standards of right and wrong, and influences behavior patterns and attitudes. The individual comes to bear the stamp of his neighborhood.

The Church and The Neighborhood

There is no hard and fast line of demarcation between the social and the religious phases of life. The former need to be permeated with the altruistic and cooperative teachings of religion; the latter cannot be expressed other than in a social setting, inasmuch as religion involves man's relation to man as well as man's relation to God. Therefore, it is not surprising that in a rural neighborhood the church performs social as well as religious functions.

1. The Church Strengthens The Neighborhood As A Social Unit

(a) As a binding agent. The support of a mutually-shared institution contributes much to a feeling of attachment among the families of a neighborhood. The sacrifice of time, money and effort involved in the building and maintenance of a church binds people together, gives them a "consciousness of kind," and thus strengthens the neighborhood ties. Quite the opposite can be true if the church and the school or else two churches become involved in disruptive conflict; but fortunately such instances, though all too common, are not the rule.

(b) As a medium of social intercourse. Since face-to-face association is a fundamental need of men, it is easy to explain why members of rural congregations "visit together" both before and after the church service. They take advantage of the common meeting-place to find out the latest happenings and to sound out some neighbor as to the advisability of doing this or that. Partly in this way informal social control continues to operate. Some ministers who overlook this legitimate social function of the rural church minimize the importance of some of the women's organizations by saying, "All that the women do all day long is eat and gossip." Without going into the merits or demerits of gossiping, we can say that the intimate association among the women is as necessary as the food which they prepare and consume so wholeheartedly.

Only a small amount of tornado insurance was carried and it seemed an impossible task to rebuild with a membership made up almost entirely of tenants and day laborers. As we stood amid the wreckage, with the rain coming down in torrents, we wept like children, unashamed. But sorrow lasted only for the night; with the morning light came the determination to rebuild in spite of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

The pastor was selected as chairman of the Building Committee and general foreman of construction. It was decided to make some improvements in rebuilding and to use the old walls that were in good condition. A call for volunteer workers went out and they responded by the hundreds. The good women of the church and community fed the workers, and some came one day, others the next, so that the work never stopped. So built we the walls, for the people had a mind to work. A basement was blasted out of solid rock and a furnace was installed. The old carbide lighting system gave way to electric lights. A balcony was installed with a vestibule underneath, which not only added seating room, but very materially cut down disturbance of the service by late comers. A new carpet was put down covering the entire floor, and the interior decorated to give a worshipful atmosphere. The entire neighborhood entered into the spirit of rebuilding and many will go there now and point out the part they had in the reconstruction and all rejoice in the fact that they had a part in it all.

But that has not ended our efforts to provide an efficient workshop for Christian character building in our community, where a growing Bible School can be adequately housed, where community gatherings can be held and where the social side of the neighborhood can be developed under right environment. Long before the church was wrecked, a plan for such a building had been drawn up, and while building the church, openings were left in the walls to connect with it. There have been no funds, but there has been a vast amount of energy and hard-headed determination to complete the job. For one whole summer we worked upon the excavation. Last year was devoted to laying the foundation and now in the summer of 1941 we are attempting to erect the building. Our plans also include an up-to-date playground with supervised recreation, and landscaping the seven acres of church grounds to provide a paradise of beauty, as an escape from the conventional surroundings of most tenant homes, and to create a desire for the beautiful in nature, of which the Creator has so bountifully provided, that in them we might see His glory and majesty.

The relationship between pastor and people is tender in the extreme; they shower upon him continued evidence of good will and he responds in like manner. The relationship between landlord and tenant is most cordial. There is no line of demarcation in the church, such as is found in many localities. Except for those taught by the pastor and his wife, every class in the Sunday School is taught by a tenant. Every officer of the Sunday School is a tenant, and even the Boards of Trustees and Deacons have a tenant in their membership. The wives of tenants are, for the most part, active in all church affairs and in some cases take the lead in such activities.

They contribute liberally to the church program, and to every community appeal they are among the first to respond. One young married man said, "Whenever there is a call for help, I'll be right there, and I know that if I should have trouble they will stand by me." The great Teacher declared that to "Love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart, soul and strength" was the first and great commandment, and that the second was like unto it, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." This we have endeavored to teach and to practice and out of the silence there seems to come a voice saying, "Even as ye did it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto Me."

To deepen the religious life of the neighborhood and to provoke to ever-increasing neighborliness is our aim. With faith in the Divine Arbiter and with the continued cooperation of our friends and neighbors, we believe that success is assured.

T. W. Spicer